

# NZ Listener

August 14-20 2010 Vol 225 No 3666

## Hallmark of a community

by Mark Amery

### **Fiona Jack pays tribute to New Zealand's war memorial halls.**

Public galleries can have all the draughty grandeur of mausoleums. Often housed in buildings originally intended for different purposes, stripped to white to provide a blank slate, they can feel like places where art goes to rest in peace, not kick against the pricks.

There are some nice twists, then, to New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery presenting a tribute to that most down-home of institutions, the war memorial hall.

A former cinema, the Govett-Brewster is more character-filled than most galleries, yet within Taranaki still has the rarefied air of a majestic other. But with her exhibition *Living Halls*, Fiona Jack has brought together information and images of community halls from around the country and even invited communities to contribute a painting of their hall.

A corner of the gallery is awash with these homely and charming paintings, the antithesis of what you might expect at the gallery. Our regions are full of stories of stoushes between galleries, councils and letter-to-the-editor writers over local representation (or the lack of it). No more so than for the Govett-Brewster, with its reputation for international and national excellence. But under the blanket of *Living Halls*, Jack has sneaked in local community artists from around the country.

"I've done a lot of projects that open the doors to people," she says, "but opening the doors of the gallery to a group of artists who are outside that contemporary art circuit is a really nice thing, and to experience the depth of meaning for the people involved. I think this has been a hugely popular show because it's paintings people can recognise.

"It was just important for me to honour the inception of these halls as 'by a

community and for a community’, so I went back to those communities to represent them [with their paintings] as they are now. I could easily have driven the whole country taking photos, but I find that vastly less interesting.”

Public archive, museum exhibit and community show all rolled into an art project, *Living Halls* is rich with the tensions of how public spaces function. Its split arrangement in the gallery doesn’t help one navigate this much, and for an exhibition called *Living Halls* it feels too much like a memorial – the life of these halls covered by institutional archival dust. But contemporary art thrives on taking on difficult in-between spaces, and this remains a fascinating project.

Jack is receptive to criticism. *Living Halls* was begun during her residency at the Govett-Brewster over the summer and is just the start of a major project involving a University of Auckland research grant. It will have many other forms.

“When I started this show, I had no idea it was going to grow to be this big. I assumed there would be existing research on this subject. As I went along, I realised there was very little and the project took on a responsibility to do quite a significant body of national research for it to then end up in a gallery.”

Collaboration and boundary breaking are key components of Jack’s art practice. In gutsy, complex ways, she makes us aware of the physical structures that bring us together, and separate us. It’s what makes her one of our most vital contemporary artists. Involving significant research, her projects bind history and the present together, often on politically contentious ground, and in doing so encourage new models for the use of public space.

For TVNZ 7’s *New Artland* in 2008, Jack collaborated with Ngati Whatua o Orakei to reconstruct a wooden palisade in Okahu Bay, Auckland, built in 1943 to give the iwi a sense of community and privacy against encroaching urbanisation. That same year, for her exhibition *General Assembly*, Jack asked the public to rewrite, on the walls of the Mary Newton Gallery in Wellington, paragraphs from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. At that stage, New Zealand was one of only four countries not to ratify the treaty (we finally did so this year).

“My mum’s family are from Culverden, north of Christchurch, and my grandfather’s name is on the roll of honour board there,” Jack says of the inspiration for *Living Halls*. “Growing up, I remember thinking what a beautiful structure they were. As my practice has developed, [the memorial hall] has become a logical interface of lots of the ideas I’m interested in, in terms of social space and how we collectively define how we use space and frame ourselves

aesthetically. I just had no idea it would be so undiscussed.”

The country became dotted with obelisks, statues and arches after World War I, but the memorial hall had its heyday after World War II.

“The concept of the living memorial started in the United States, but New Zealand and Australia were the only places – and somewhat a little in England – where the hall was really embraced as a small vernacular community structure. In Australia to a degree, but nowhere as much as New Zealand, which is probably mostly to do with the fact there was a subsidy here.” (The Government offered communities £1 for every pound they raised for building a hall.)

At last count, Jack’s project had identified 423 halls, with another 70 locations question-marked. Records are remarkably incomplete. Although some halls have been destroyed, others are still being identified, and there are conflicting opinions as to the status of others as memorials.

Another way Jack honours the fact these halls were conceived by their communities is with hand-drawn reproductions of National Archives-held drawings of planned buildings, right down to replicating paper and fold marks. “The obvious thing to do would have been to photograph the drawings but it just leaves me cold. I wanted to work through the physical aspects of it, so it activates the drawing. There’s nothing like redrawing to go deep into someone’s headspace.

“The immediacy of the need is what strikes me about the drawings. A moment in time that a community has said, ‘We need a hall, we’ll write a letter to the head of Internal Affairs.’ That directness of communication and pragmatism is kind of extraordinary. Counter to that, it does seem today that you can have these structures come into being because of political interest or financial interest rather than community interest. The Auckland wharf debacle is a classic example.”

Archival material also speaks to this. *Living Halls* has files with copies of funding applications and correspondence with the ministry. On first flick, I end up in Motueka with a 1962 letter from the mayor to the Department of Internal Affairs. It requests dispensation from the condition that the hall be available for everyone’s use, so as to refuse use by Jehovah’s Witnesses. “These people,” writes the mayor, “were gazetted as a subversive organisation during the last war and may have been indirectly, if not directly, responsible for the deaths of some of the very men for which the hall is built as a memorial.” The request was declined.

Another exhibition element is a listing of the halls on roll of honour boards, which, unvarnished, are intended to suggest their existence as living things.

“What you’re seeing in the show is just the tip of the surface,” says Jack. “I’ve got videos, audio and tens of thousands of photos. I see the show very much as a community archive. I have this whole other body of work of interviews, which I haven’t finished. Which is epic. For every interview I have, there’s usually a few mutton roasts ...”

**FIONA JACK: LIVING HALLS, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, until September 5.**

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